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OPENING

Military

Local servicemembers get "Don't ask, don't tell" survival training

More than a dozen local soldiers and airmen got survival tips this week on a topic not covered at basic training: how to coexist with the military's "Don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue" policy.

The controversial rule was instituted two years ago by the Clinton administration to allow gays and lesbians to serve quietly, as long as they aren't open about their homosexuality. It was intended to narrow the circumstances under which commanders could initiate investigations.

But former Army Capt. Michelle Benecke, who spoke at a community center Monday night, has a battalion of statistics and stories that suggest the policy is a bust: an increase in discharges for homosexuality, which reached a four-year peak of 722 during fiscal year '95; 363 documented violations of the rule in the last year alone; and a continuation of witchhunts the policy was supposed to eliminate.

"Colorado Springs ranks right up there behind Texas and Florida among our toughest areas," said Benecke, co-director of the Washington-based Servicemembers Legal Defense Network. She was joined by retired Naval Petty Officer Keith Meinhold, who in 1992 became the first openly gay servicemember to win reinstatement.

Benecke painted a grim picture of "prying" questions, surprise "inspections," selective enforcement of supposedly gender-neutral policies against certain sex acts, and other measures that betray the spirit, and sometimes the letter, of the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Defense Secretary William Perry has ordered an investigation into the allegations.

Local military spokespeople said the policy has had little effect. "We have not seen any directives here that would change day-to-day operations," said Fort Carson Sgt. Sharon Pierce. "It's not had a big effect, because searching out homosexuals was not something we did."

Five airmen stationed at Peterson Air Force Base were discharged for homosexuality between 1992 and 1995, according to Lt. Rick Hargrave; none have been discharged this year. Nor have any cadets been booted under the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, according to Air Force Academy Col. Joe Purka. However, two male cadets were disenrolled earlier this year under the academy's sexual misbehavior policy, which prohibits sex between cadets at the academy. "They basically were involved in a sexual act together. ... However, the issue of their orientation never entered into it," Purka said.

According to SLDN, 20,577 servicemembers have been discharged for homosexuality from 1980 through 1995; the cost of training their replacements has topped $600 million.

— The Independent

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